DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 762 TM 011 002

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TITLE When Unintended Consequences Become the Main Effect: Evaluating the Development of a Foster Parent Training Program.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Evaluation Association (Kansas City, MO, October 29-November 1, 1986). The last page may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Advocacy; County Programs; Databases; Evaluation Methods; Financial Support; *Foster Care; Foster Children; *Foster Family; *Needs Assessment; Nonprofit Organizations; *Parent Counseling; *Parent Education; *Program Evaluation; Social Services; Social Work; Social Workers; Staff Development; Systems Analysts
IDENTIFIERS *Evaluator Characteristics

ABSTRACT

A program of education, training, and support provided to foster parents in a California county through a nonprofit agency is evaluated. The evaluators' experience indicates that: (1) evaluations are gaining in popularity; (2) role shifts by evaluators are sometimes difficult to perceive; (3) program staff are unlikely to use evaluative feedback unless it matches their own agendas; (4) communication breakdowns occur even in small organizations; and (5) the reorganization of existing services is sometimes preferable to development of a new program. Although direct measures of the program's services do not show significant improvement in the status of foster children and foster parenting, it was found that the program does have an impact on the foster care community. Recommendations based on the experience of the evaluators include support of database development and maintenance, improvement of county services coordination, providing of funding for planning and development as well as implementation of a program, close scrutiny of goals of short-term programs, attention of unintended consequences of programs, and continued evaluation of field-based social services. (TJH)

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When unintended consequences become the main effect:

Evaluating the development of a foster parent training program

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Evaluation Association, October, 1986, Kansas City, Missouri.

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Introduction

In any evaluation project , evaluators will, in all likelihood, learn about the content of the program they are evaluating. In our situation--as beginning evaluators enrolled in a training program--the most important lessons we learned had absolutely nothing to do with the content of the program we were evaluating. For example, one might assume that we would learn a great deal about children at risk since we were evaluating a foster parent training program. Instead, what we learned focused mainly on the different types of roles evaluators must assume when faced with evaluating a developing program. To experienced evaluators, the lessons we will discuss in this paper are no doubt ones with which they are well acquainted. For novice evaluators, however, this paper may shed some light on the complex process of evaluating a program which is seated within a network of social services. Perhaps a discussion of this sort will forewarn novice evaluators about what to expect if they take on an evaluation project similar to ours.

Background

In 1983, a Grand Jury Report in a county in California put forth several mandates regarding the care and assessment of foster or dependent children. Potential foster parents were the target of many of these mandates, including: 1) a system of mandated training for foster parents; 2) a network of support groups pairing veteran and new

foster parents in a buddy system; 3) recording attendance at orientation meetings; and 4) assessing the potential for child abuse during the licensing of new foster homes. The assumption was that by helping foster parents, the benefits would somehow filter down to the dependent children placed in their homes.

Prior to 1983, foster parent organizations existed in nearly every geographical district of the county. However, funding cuts led to lay-offs of permanent Department of Social Services (DSS) personnel associated with these foster parent organizations. As as result, only two foster parent organizations were active when we began the evaluation in April, 1985. One was specifically targeted for the needs of Fost-Adopt parents (those interested in adopting a child) ; the other served Hispanic foster parents.

In addition to these two organizations, the only other formal program that remained for meeting the specific needs of foster parents were the three orientation meetings sponsored by DSS. Attendance at these meetings was required of all individuals interested in adopting children or becoming foster parents. These didactic presentations focused mainly on generic problems parents might encounter with children rather than issues related exclusively to foster parenting. These three meetings were part of the recruitment and licensing process and took place prior to parents having any placements in their homes. Hence, much of the discussion centered around licensing requirements. Since many individuals had still not received a foster child or fost-adopt placement six months after these orientation meetings, it is questionable whether any of the material presented to them could be recalled by these individuals. Thus, in response to a perceived need, a non-profit agency proposed and

was funded to offer a program of education, training, and support for foster parents.

Enter Evaluators

*Lesson # 1: *Evaluations are gaining in popularity. While few people seem to understand the complexities and benefits of evaluation research, they seem acquainted with the idea that it increases the credibility of service programs. Therefore, funding foundations are more frequently requesting that programs include evaluations as a requisite for funding. Unfortunately, evaluators, funding agencies, and agencies responsible for program delivery all seem to have different perspectives on evaluation processes and outcomes.*

An evaluation component was written into the proposal at the request of the funding agency. The evaluation began during the first days of the program's development, prior to the hiring of the social worker who was supposed to design and implement the program. The program was funded for one year. Other than the promise to deliver a program of education, training, and support, and a global sketch of the needs of foster children in the county, the proposal offered little in the way of specifics: they did not have a clear sense of what they wanted to do, nor what they wanted us to do.

The role we would assume in relation to the program staff (N=2) was open for definition, as was the program they hoped to deliver. One role we consistently maintained was our role as evaluation research educators. We spent a good deal of time describing evaluation, distinguishing this activity from traditional conceptions of

pass/fail judgments of program efficacy. We also tried to clarify what activities would be inappropriate or hindrances to the evaluation process. When we first discussed our roles as evaluators, a prominent member of the advisory committee insisted that the best way to evaluate the program would be through an experimental design complete with randomized assignment. Ultimately, the project staff did concur that an experimental design would not be appropriate. Nevertheless, we never reached consensus on exactly what the evaluation should entail.

In the beginning of the project we assumed that the funding agency would be interested in the kinds of information typically produced in an evaluation: data related to how the program influenced the participants, data about the various program components that were most effective in meeting the program's goals, and how the program ultimately affected the foster children. Instead, when we submitted our six-month report, we found that the foundation seemed more interested in the agency's account of its expenditures than in our account of what had taken place over the six-month period. Moreover, the agency had hoped that our six-month report and our final report could be used to convince the funding agency to allot more funds for the program. When the six-month report failed to meet this expectation, there was a dramatic shift in our relationship with the agency staff. After reflecting on this shift, we realized that throughout the evaluation there had been other, less dramatic, shifts in our role.

* Lesson #2: *Very often we don't recognize when our role shifts or how others*

perceive us until we are asked something that crosses our own internal boundaries regarding where evaluation begins and ends.

More often than not, the shift we experienced in roles coincided with a shift in staff goals, perceptions, or expectations. Sometimes this shift centered around a conflict between the staff and team of evaluators which sharpened our own sense of what social service agencies conceive evaluation to be.

Collaborator: When we first began the program evaluation we had the expectation that the program was clearly conceived, or at least had some semblance of coherence. That is, we expected that the staff held (if not on paper, than in mind) a clear conception of an intact program--a model against which they would attempt to match and evaluate their own efforts. They had neither. What existed in reality were loosely coupled events which left the immediate impression of an unmet need in the community. Therefore, we joined forces with the director in searching the literature, conducting ERIC searches, reviewing documents from other programs, and referring possible candidates to the program director.

Our review of the literature yielded little evidence about the few models after which this county agency might pattern its own program. According to law professor , Mike Wald, a great deal has been written about dependent children, but **very little has been written about the effects of foster parent training or foster parenting**. Our own literature search confirmed this.

In the past decade, many programs have been developed to address the needs of foster parents. However, most of the information written on foster parenting in the

literature is descriptive in nature. Of the 33 listings obtained in the computer search, only 3 involved experimental or evaluation research studies of foster parent training programs.

What could we conclude about foster parent training? Because so few studies have been documented it was, quite frankly, difficult to conclude anything about what works best in foster parent training programs. It was not even clear whether foster parent training programs are the most effective means of preparing adults to function successfully in this role. Yet, insufficient evidence was not grounds for abandoning the development of a foster parent training program. It is, however, the best reason available for **including evaluation and research components in field-based social service programs**.

None of the tasks we performed in the role of collaborator are particularly unusual for evaluators to undertake. But these activities created in us a sense of investment in getting the program started. In essence, we lost what little ground we had gained in educating the agency about the purpose and role of evaluation. Luckily, even our role as collaborators had its limits. As researchers, we wanted to base our recommendations in the literature. We didn't feel comfortable advocating one structure over another, since little evidence existed to suggest that any particular method was superior to others.

At this point the program director concluded that the outside resources were either "outdated" or inappropriate. She began to rely on anecdotal information from other county and state program directors and from members of her advisory board,

some of whom were foster parents. Since we did not want to use this as the sole source of information upon which to design the program, we intensified our evaluation efforts in two activities: networking (i.e., shared problem solving with other related agencies and social service providers) and needs assessment. It was about this time that the social worker was hired, so the burden of finding, developing, and integrating program prototypes fell on her shoulders and we turned our attention to gathering specific information about the local needs of foster parents and children. This change in staff initiated the shift in our role from collaborator to informant.

*Lesson # 3: *We found that program staff would not necessarily use the information we provided if it didn't match their own agendas , even if we made every attempt to deliver information which provided answers to the questions they themselves had formulated.*

Informant . It was this third role that moved us away from and out of the program's boundaries into the social system of support services for foster parents and children. Our relationships with these other agencies were prompted by a need to get information about the foster children and foster parents in order to feed it back to the agency as they began developing the foster parent training program.

We wanted to avoid duplicating statistical data collection if others had been engaged in that activity as a part of delivering services to foster parents and children in the county. However, we found that the data in the statistical tables on dependent children produced and provided by DSS was out of date and difficult to interpret. We

were informed that approximately 30 children per month entered the foster care system in the county. Although an examination of the statistical data did not make clear where these 30 children ended up, we extrapolated from the representative categories what outcomes might result for these children once they entered the foster care system (see Appendix A). One thing was clear from the data: foster children were at least alive, if not well, and living in the county. It appeared that there were equal numbers of children placed in group homes and single family homes. Since the target audience of the program was single family foster parents, we needed to determine whether these individuals were in need of the type of program the agency was going to provide.

As a means of gathering data to answer this question, we conducted mail and phone surveys and held interviews with key informants in the other social service agencies, and recorded information made available to foster parents throughout DSS' orientations. This process put us into contact with many people who were not directly involved with the program. It also fleshed out the initial picture sketched in the proposal by providing details which accentuated the needs of foster parents and foster children. The details we collected painted a different picture than the one the program director had anticipated. Need was not the only critical factor in getting an audience to partake of a service, even one that is specifically developed with their needs in mind. According to the vast majority of social service providers that we spoke with, attendance at meetings and program sessions for foster parents was notoriously low . The program we were evaluating was no exception.

The problem of getting warm bodies to a workshop, a training session, or support

group is not a new one. Yet, the question "Why don't people attend?" has never been answered to the satisfaction of social service programs and personnel. Therefore, they continue to develop new programs, or reinvent old programs with new names, in the belief that one will finally capture the attention, interest, and presence of the target audience. We believed foster parents in this county might reveal some new insight into why other programs had failed, and where this program might hope to succeed. However, the type of information we sought to collect and disseminate became clouded by the expectations of the program staff who had been holding support groups for which they wanted specific information--information which we believed would violate the confidentiality of the participants and the social worker.

The dilemma we faced was how to get information that was useful to the program staff, but that was also ethically appropriate to gather. The information we gathered ended up lying dormant under more pressing issues: getting people to attend the program that existed, and prodding the development of the program into more creative outlets than the stock avenues already deemed innappropriate by the director. For example, in our needs assessment surveys we found that foster parents in this county were more interested in attending program sessions that provided training (i.e., specific information and techniques that would help them deal with the day-to-day problems of foster parenting). Instead of providing this service, the program social worker insisted that support groups (i.e., informal, unstructured gatherings where people share whatever is on their minds) should be the first step in program development. Thus we found that the information we had gathered was brushed aside.

Lesson # 4: *Even in small organizations there can be a complete breakdown in communication which ultimately affects the evaluators' role. The need to look at multiple sources of perceptions is crucial for defining and evaluating the program. Who do we look at? Which is the target audience the program is intended to impact?*

Mediator: In solving the dilemma raised in our role as informant, we firmly planted ourselves back in the program's sphere of influence and into a new evaluation role as mediator. We discovered that the director and social worker were at odds in their goals and plans, and that the drive to deliver services was stronger than ever. Two conceptual frameworks regarding what form a foster parent training program should take were at work. These personnel conflicts led to further problems in defining our role as evaluators.

By this time it was clear that we were already committed to evaluating the development of the program, rather than the program itself. When we were brought together with the program staff to assist them in defining their roles and goals, we viewed this as another step in the evaluation of the process of shaping a particular form and style of social service delivery.

At this time, we were also collecting data regarding the components of the program that were in operation, which we intended to feedback to the staff as they progressed each week. We had been calling foster parents to find out if they were aware of the program's existence. When we were asked by the program director to inform them about upcoming program events, we once again recycled through our

educational role and discussed why this would not be appropriate if we wished to maintain a neutral stance in gathering data regarding participant perceptions and concerns. After making the declaration that we were not official program staff, we were once again free (i.e. excommunicated) to explore the program from afar.

The shift in our role as evaluators coincided with a shift in the program's direction. Rather than just offering support groups, the agency held a conference with guest speakers knowledgeable about the foster care system and continued to hold these types of presentations (on a smaller scale) twice a month. Although the social worker and program director were anxious to find out how useful foster parents were finding these support groups, we began to doubt the utility of evaluating the impact of the program on the target audiences (i.e., foster parents and foster children) because the support sessions were so poorly attended by foster parents.

It was at this time that we began looking at the unanticipated consequences of the program. It was clear from our observations and assessment of the conference and several of the subsequent meetings that the program was having an impact on the network of foster care providers, of which the foster parents were but one part.

Lesson # 5: *Just because people say there's a need and the target group affirms that services are lacking does not necessarily justify the development of a new program. It may mean that a reorganization of existing services is needed.*

Systems Analysts: Early on in the evaluation we had identified three audiences which were critical to the development and success of the program. They included

foster parents and children, the community of helpers, such as caseworkers, probation officers, community agency workers, school counselors, and family doctors, and finally, those charged with decision making and power over the conduct and welfare of the first two audiences--the juvenile court system, the administrators and supervisors of DSS, and child advocacy organizations. While we had made initial contacts with this last audience during the needs assessment and networking phase, our primary efforts had concentrated on gathering information from the first two audiences.

After twice shifting to and from the program and the social system of support services, we ended the evaluation by defining the importance of the program, its components, and its effects from a global, external perspective. We found that the program was both helped and hindered by their reliance on the existing social service network. They were hindered because the network that existed was poorly structured and relied on inadequate information about the target audiences. However, the network did allow them to contact resource specialists who were knowledgeable about the needs of foster parents and existing services of which they could avail themselves. In turn, the program we evaluated contributed to a stronger networking system by improving the communication between different social service providers.

Conclusions

Although originally everyone in the foster care community, including social workers, juvenile court judges, child advocates, and the foster parents themselves expressed the belief that a foster parent program was a necessary service, it is difficult

to assess whether or not this program was successful in creating a "client group" who would demand that the services be continued with public support. Possibly, given more time, this program might have expanded the participating core of foster parents into a more powerful and cohesive group willing to fight for their rights to more adequate services.

Although direct measurements of the program's services did not indicate significant improvements in the status of foster children and foster parenting, the program did have an impact on the foster care community. The initial bases for assessing the needs and recruiting program participants (e.g., networking), became the most profound development and outcome of the program's year-long efforts. In our final interviews with key informants from the decision making and powerbase bodies of the foster care community, all commented upon the renewed vision and opened channels of communication among the various agencies. Moreover, channels of communication which heretofore did not exist were constructed just as others which had broken down were reopened. The program never developed to its fullest potential, but in the process it served as a catalyst for new program funding for foster children and as a forum for clarifying and prioritizing the needs of foster parents. Thus, the unintended consequences of the program became the main effect.

Summary and Recommendations

We would like to conclude with some of the lessons we have learned from the perspective of defining our role as evaluators and in relation to evaluating a foster parent training program which is embedded in a social service system. The most critical lesson learned is that it is extremely important for evaluators to maintain a respectable distance when they are called in to conduct an evaluation for a small organization, especially when the program they are evaluating is also being "birthed". The second critical lesson involves one which plagues many social service agencies receiving funding to "change the world" in less time than it takes to figure out what needs changing. Particularly, in evaluating program development it is important to get people to commit themselves to a plan of action so that the first year doesn't get bogged down in rehashing old schemes or hit-and-miss efforts. Finally, when called in to evaluate a program in the development phase, ask yourself:

1) Who said there was a need for a new service?
2) How much do we know about this need?
3) What services already exist for this group?
4) Why are existing services falling short of meeting this need?
5) What might be done to improve or reorganize services that already exist?

Faced with developing a one-year program for the training, education, and support for foster parents in the county, the agency was faced with a number of obstacles that will undoubtedly plague other social service organizations interested in developing programs for this target audience :

1. Lack of a reliable and accessible data base about foster children and foster parents

from which to draw information about the characteristics and needs of their target audience.

2. Lack of literature about foster parent training programs from which to draw information for planning an effective program.

3. Lack of coordination between county services aimed at meeting needs of foster parents and dependent children.

4. Lack of time for sufficient planning and development for the program since it was funded for one year during which time it was expected to provide services.

5. Overextended foster parents who were, for the most part, unwilling to devote time to a program even when they believed the services would be valuable.

Despite these obstacles, this program achieved the following:

1. Dissemination of information regarding available services to a large group of foster parents and other community agencies.

2. Increased communication and coordination between individuals and agencies responsible for services for foster children and foster parents.

3. Development of a new program specifically for foster children, which grew out of the older program.

4. Increased public awareness about the plight of foster children due to dissemination of information about the program through the media and through the efforts at networking with other agencies providing social services.

5. Recruitment of a "core" group of foster parents who continued to show interest in

future developments at the close of the first year .

Based on our experiences as evaluators of this program, we offer the following recommendations to any agency who is attempting to develop social services for the foster care community:

1. Continued efforts to develop a reliable and accessible data base in the county on both foster parents and foster children. Without this data, it is doubtful whether any program can adequately plan to meet the needs of their target audience.

2. Increased efforts at coordinating county services, both public and private, that attempt to serve the needs of the foster care community.
possibly by establishing a central clearinghouse or hotline that is accessible to foster parents.

3. Funding should be provided for the planning and development of a program, not just its implementation. Feeling pressured to somehow produce tangible outcomes in a short period of time can lead to the initiation of a program that is not adequately planned. Expected "start-up" time should be explicitly stated in proposals for funding so that both funding agencies and those responsible for implementing the program do not have unrealistic expectations.

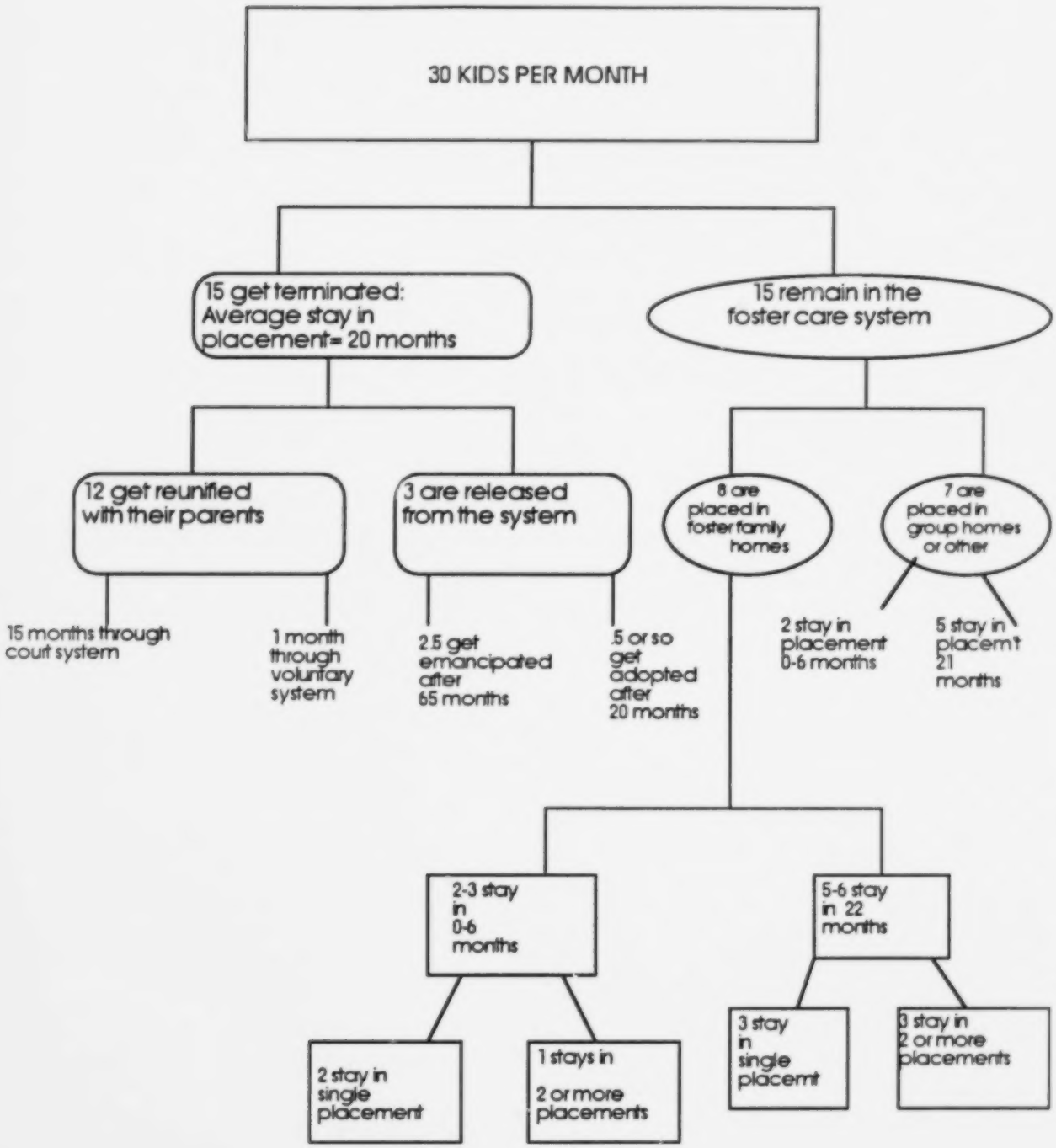
4. Programs that are funded for only one year need to more clearly deliniate how they will achieve their goals, and to realize that such programs can only have a very limited impact due to their short duration.

5. Those who fund proposals, implement programs, or evaluate social programs need

to pay close attention to the unanticipated consequences of programs. In the case of this agency's program, these unintended consequences were in essence the main effects of the program.

6. Since the data base on foster parenting is limited, we believe in the need for continued evaluation of field-based social services aimed at improving the foster care system. These evaluations should be completed by "outsiders" to the system, because those who are somehow invested in the system will find it difficult to remain unbiased. Since funding for all social services is limited, agencies who finance such programs have the responsibilty both to themselves and the clients of the programs to make sure that the impacts of these programs are evaluated. We applaud the fact that such an evaluation component was requested by the funding foundation, and that the program staff were most cooperative in aiding our efforts.

Hypothetical Situation of the Foster Child's
Exit and Entry into the Foster Care System
In [redacted] County



Evaluation of the Development of a Foster Parent Training Program: Roles and Lessons Learned

ROLES	LESSONS
Evaluation Research Educators	#1: What constitutes an evaluation?
Collaborators	#2: Role Shifts and expectations
Informants	#3: Utility of information gathered for program development
Mediators	#4: Examining multiple perceptions of program success
Systems Analysts	#5: Determining the need for new services

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE FOSTER CARE COMMUNITY:

Recommendations and Suggestions

* Continue efforts to develop a reliable and accessible data base on both foster parents and foster children.

* Increase efforts at coordinating services, both public and private, that attempt to serve the needs of the foster care community.

* Funding should be provided for the planning and development of a program, not just its implementation.

* Programs funded only for one year need to clearly delineate how they will achieve their goals, and realize that they can only have a limited impact due to their short duration.

* Those who fund proposals, implement programs, or evaluate social programs need to pay close attention to the unanticipated consequences of programs.

* Since the data base on foster parenting is limited ,it is important that evaluations of field-based programs aimed at the improvement of the foster care system are continued.